

## Book Note

### Teaching Writing Functionally: A Review of Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power*

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Writing well is one of the most important skills for behavior analysts to develop, for it is primarily through writing that we teach others what we have learned (Miller, 1974). Many of us, however, find writing difficult and aversive (Vargas, 1978, p. 16).

These problems may have their origins in the manner in which writing is taught. The traditional approach is structural, rule-governed, and based on contrived and aversive consequences. Most writing textbooks, for example, describe the characteristics of good and bad writing and offer rules to induce students to produce prose that looks like good writing (Elbow, 1973). Teachers then criticize students' writing based on how well the rules are followed or the models matched; these critiques are generally punishing. Without empirical analyses of the traditional approach, we cannot conclude that it is entirely ineffective, but we can look for an approach that is more consistent with our understanding of how complex skills, like writing, are acquired (see, e.g., Zoellner, 1969).

In his text, *Writing with Power*, Peter Elbow takes a nontraditional approach to teaching writing, due, perhaps, to his informal analysis of how people learn to write. He notes that good writers give remarkably contradictory accounts of what they are doing when they write, suggesting that good writing is, at least in part, the result of shaping by natural con-

tingencies and perhaps not achieved by teaching students to follow rules alone. This observation led him to develop a teaching method that is functional instead of structural, that uses and amplifies natural contingencies, and that is remarkably consistent with behavior analysis.

Behavior analysts have promoted a functional approach to writing. Skinner (1957), for example, analyzed writing as a special case of verbal behavior. In an extension of Skinner's analysis, Vargas (1978) designed exercises that permit students' writing to come under the control of their classmates' reactions. Later, Skinner (1981) described a variety of techniques he developed to control his own writing. In *Writing with Power*, Elbow, like Skinner, describes procedures that he has found useful with his own writing. Like Vargas, he has tested and refined his procedures. His book is written for college students and their teachers, but will be useful to anyone with at least a high school level writing repertoire and an interest in learning to write better.

In Chapter 1, Elbow describes the essence of his approach, which is to separate the competing activities of producing words and criticizing them. Separating these activities generally results in more and better writing because criticizing is thereby not as likely to punish production (p. 7; see also Skinner, 1981, p. 5). In Chapter 2, he explains the "free writing exercise"—a method of practicing the behavior required for producing words without criticizing them.

Elbow introduces the practice of "sharing" in Chapter 3. Sharing involves giving or reading your writing to a sympathetic reader or listener. The purpose is

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to establish and practice using other people as your audience rather than as your critics. In addition, sharing provides opportunities for modeling and imitation when used in the classroom.

Elbow describes the "direct writing process" in Chapters 4 and 5. The method is relatively simple: Divide your time in half; spend the first half writing down everything you can think of on the topic without concern for format, style, or grammar; and use the second half of your time to revise, picking out the good material and organizing it into an effective piece. It is interesting to note that Elbow, like Skinner (1981), leaves correcting mistakes in form and grammar for last.

In Chapter 6, Elbow discusses the practice of trying to write a piece perfectly the first time through. He calls this the "dangerous approach" because criticism can too easily compete with and punish production, bringing progress to a halt. This method is, however, used by some experts, and if you are an expert, he has suggestions for how to refine your skills.

In the next 10 chapters, Elbow explains how his procedures can be elaborated and adapted to more complicated and more important writing tasks.

Skinner (1957, pp. 172–184) explained the importance of understanding how different audiences exert control over verbal behavior. Elbow recognizes this, and devotes four chapters to a discussion of the complex relationship between writers and readers. In addition, he offers suggestions for recruiting appropriate "feedback" and describes how to react to critiques so as not to punish the reader's behavior.

In the last five chapters, Elbow deals with style, voice, and power—the "mystical" aspects of writing. Here the target behaviors, and the procedures for learning them, are less well-defined. Yet, through examples, Elbow makes a convincing argument that the skills he is trying to teach are real and important.

Elbow is not a behavior analyst, and does not claim to be, but his behavior as a teacher seems to be strongly under the

control of how easily and rapidly his students learn to write. Behavior analysts who seek techniques for improving their own and their students' writing will find Elbow's methods useful, but those who seek a technology for teaching writing will see the need for more analysis. A complete behavior analysis may help eliminate unnecessary components and identify currently unspecified, yet critical, elements of Elbow's method.

Elbow's writing style is clear and direct, friendly and conversational—all of which make his text enjoyable to read. Perhaps the only irritating aspect of Elbow's text for behavior analysts is his frequent use of mentalistic language. But even this irritation is mild because much of his mentalism is analogy, and clear behavioral interpretation is made easy by the functional and empirical nature of Elbow's approach.

Skinner (1957) introduced the possibility of analyzing verbal behavior as an operant. Vargas (1978) and Skinner (1981) showed us how to establish control over writing as a special type of verbal behavior. In *Writing with Power*, Peter Elbow offers us techniques for learning to write more effectively. His functional methods, and his informal analysis of them, extend an invitation to develop a complete technology for teaching writing.

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